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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 RANGOON 000018

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SUBJECT: WARPED THINKING IN BURMA: INSIGHTS FROM AN INSIDER

Classified By: CDA Shari Villarosa for Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

11. (C) Summary: Yin Yin Oo, a Foreign Ministry official close to Number Three General Thura Shwe Mann and the sister of Deputy Foreign Minister Kyaw Thu, has been authorized to engage in general discussions with the US and British Embassies. She contacted Charge just before Christmas to suggest a meeting, after not being in contact since last July. Charge met her for dinner January 7 and in the course of discussion garnered a number of useful insights into the warped thinking of the senior generals, as well their general lack of understanding about how the rest of the world operates. Yin Yin Oo acknowledged they were xenophobic and feared change. They have paranoid delusions about the United States. The absence of common sense or logic, combined with distorted information, in the twisted minds of the senior generals helps to explain why it is so difficult to influence them.

Fear of Change

12. (C) Yin Yin Oo came prepared to discuss the thinking of the senior leadership, giving the Charge a chance to clarify our views of the situation inside Burma. Most of the discussion focused on the lack of dialogue, either internal and international. Yin Yin Oo acknowledged the need for Burma to change, but cited the leaders' desire to proceed cautiously. Charge retorted that they had an excess of caution and needed to just get moving, even if slowly. The senior generals are afraid of change because they may not be able to control it, explained Yin Yin Oo. Charge recounted the Vietnamese Ambassador's tale of how hard change had been to start in Vietnam, but once it began, change moved faster as the leaders realized the benefits of opening up. She added that change tends to take on its own momentum, beyond any one person's control, and while there are always a few people unhappy with change, most welcome it. Since the impetus for change in Vietnam came from relatively enlightened leaders, according to the Ambassador, Charge asked if Burma had any relatively enlightened leaders now. Yin Yin Oo thought carefully and replied, "maybe two."

Paranoid of the United States

13. (C) Revealing the regime's paranoia towards the United States, Yin Yin Oo commented several times on the First Lady's interest in Burma. Charge confirmed that the First Lady's interest was very deep and very sincere, and for that reason she kept very well informed about developments in Burma. "Isn't that unusual for a First Lady?" Yin Yin Oo asked. What was unusual, replied the Charge, noting we had a former First Lady running for President. Yin Yin Oo mentioned reports that the First Lady had met with UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon and UN Advisor on Burma

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Gambari. She said this showed that the U.S. controlled the UN. Charge commented that most Americans think the UN does not listen to us enough, noting USG views and UN views diverged on a variety of issues. The whole world had seen what happened in September in Burma--the shooting of monks and peaceful demonstrators--and was very upset. Because of her knowledge about the country, the Charge said it was perfectly understandable for the First Lady to speak out about what happened in Burma, and she would continue to do so.

14. (C) Charge pointed out that the Burmese people and international community had hoped that a genuine dialogue would have gotten underway by now. But the fact that it now appears that the dialogue has gone nowhere, made it likely that the First Lady and others would publicly criticize the regime. Yin Yin Oo asked for more time and quiet, so that change could proceed. Charge responded that time only moves faster and faster. Everyone would like to slow time down, but cannot. She pointed out that there had been little attention on Burma since Gambari's last visit in early November, so the generals had a couple of months of quiet. Unfortunately they used that time to continue arrests, hike satellite rates to restrict news, halt dialogue, and refuse

RANGOON 00000018 002 OF 004

to allow UN envoy Gambari to return. Forty-five years of military rule had exhausted everyone's patience, even of the Asians. The international community is not inclined to give the generals another five years; they must get started now, urged the Charge.

Where's Gambari?

15. (C) Charge informed Yin Yin Oo of the dismay of Rangoon-based diplomats, who had learned recently that Gambari would not be permitted to visit again until after the mid-April water festival. As a result, Charge predicted that international criticism would start up again. If the generals do not like international criticism, then they must start talking with the pro-democracy and ethnic minority representatives, along with the UN. Yin Yin Oo tried to explain the delays on the generals' schedules: Senior General Than Shwe annually tours the country in December; the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister were traveling internationally in January; preparations for Armed Forces Day in March. Charge said the international community could only interpret the unwillingness to make time for Gambari as evidence that the regime has no interest in working with the UN.

16. (C) Yin Yin Oo asserted Gambari visited often. Charge countered that four times in two years did not constitute often. Yin Yin Oo complained when Gambari issued the statement from Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK) in Singapore after his last visit to Burma in November, it made him look biased in her favor. Charge replied that if Aung San Suu Kyi could communicate directly with the world, then she would not need to issue statements through other people. Charge also dismissed Yin Yin Oo's claim that the regime did not know in advance about the statement as untrue, while acknowledging that someone may have failed to inform Than Shwe it was coming. Yin Yin Oo commented that the statement was a good one, and that she was only reporting how senior levels of the

regime reacted. Charge expressed regret that the generals had decided to trash the statement, rather than welcome it to get the dialogue going. The international community would have applauded a welcome as a positive step forward.

¶17. (C) Charge explained that the diplomats based in Rangoon viewed Gambari's last visit as a failure because he allowed himself to be kept captive in Nay Pyi Taw by the regime. Issuing ASSK's statement was the only way he could salvage his visit to show some semblance of progress to the international community. The continuing military presence in Rangoon after the demonstrations, according to Yin Yin Oo, made Naw Pyi Taw better for receiving Gambari. Charge commented that the diplomats had to correct Gambari when he claimed that the arrests had stopped and the military presence was gone from Rangoon. To the diplomats, it appeared that Gambari had accepted completely the regime's story because he could not see the situation for himself. By parroting this to the diplomats who knew the truth, he lost credibility. Yin Yin Oo pointed out that Pinheiro had been allowed more time in Rangoon, which Charge acknowledged and added that it only made Gambari look weaker. However, neither Gambari nor Pinheiro could visit people they specifically requested to meet, nor travel freely. Until that happens, warned the Charge, it will appear to the international community that the regime is trying to hide the truth about the situation inside Burma.

Poor Communication Skills

¶18. (C) Yin Yin Oo described the difficulties Burmese officials have in getting their story out. She said they were afraid to meet with the press because they might not have the answers or might face "rude" questions. Charge responded that they could gain experience by interacting more with the press. They should be prepared for tough questions; that is the role of the press. If they do not have the answers, they should offer to get back to the questioner with the facts rather than huff off the podium as the Information

RANGOON 00000018 003 OF 004

Minister did at one press conference, recounted the Charge. His pique at the press became the story, and only made him look silly. Charge added that the practice of citing exaggerated statistics that do not accord with reality undermined the credibility of Burmese officials speaking to people living here, who know the real inflation rate whenever they shop, or whether they have electricity or not.

¶19. (C) Charge also suggested that Burmese officials permit international journalists to visit Burma regularly. They will publish critical stories, but also publish official comments, to permit their readers to make up their own minds. To gain confidence in dealing with the international press, she suggested that officials traveling abroad meet with the local press. Yin Yin Oo listened intently, and asked, 'but what if they cannot speak about certain matters?' Charge replied that then they should admit it. (Comment: This would effectively reveal that no one has the authority to comment on policies, except Than Shwe and/or Maung Aye.)

¶10. (C) Charge commented that she ascribed the discomfort with the press similarly to official reluctance to meet with her--fear. Yin Yin Oo reiterated the tendency of officials to be very cautious. Charge asked if would be criticized for meeting with her. Yin Yin Oo implied this could be possible. She said there was no requirement to seek permission from higher ups before speaking to us, but some officials might do so, just to be safe. She quickly adopted the Charge's description of this as "CYA," using it frequently during the course of the evening.

¶11. (C) Yin Yin Oo mentioned that Burmese had great respect for age, which made it difficult for younger people to talk to their elders. She expressed disappointment that the

Culture Minister, whom she described as "very close to the senior leader (Than Shwe)," had not made an effort to engage the Charge at the Independence Day dinner in Nay Pyi Taw. Charge said she had asked his opinion about the Beijing talks and what he foresaw as next steps. He looked uncomfortable, did not respond, and turned away to talk to the Japanese Ambassador. Yin Yin Oo urged the Charge to meet with Aung Gyi, the Liaison Minister to ASSK. She looked disappointed when Charge replied that she had already, and had been told that he was "too busy" without any suggestion of a time when he might be free.

Missed Opportunities

¶12. (C) Charge said these examples were missed opportunities the regime had to increase understanding about their plans. Their unwillingness to discuss their plans had caused the regime to lose the support of most of its immediate neighbors, who saw the need for changes, but had no sense that the Burmese leaders recognized this. The ASEANs had made it clear to us they would no longer defend the regime, and had thrown up their hands, the Charge reported, since the regime was unwilling to talk to their ASEAN partners. Yin Yin Oo seemed surprised to be hearing this, further revealing how little information flows inside the regime.

¶13. (C) Charge cited the Burmese CDA in Washington as another missed opportunity to communicate. She asked why a non-English speaker, who had never traveled outside of Burma, had been assigned to a place like Washington? Yin Yin Oo quickly distanced the Foreign Ministry from him, as do most other Foreign Ministry officials, saying that he was not a diplomat, but brought in from the military to "hold the fort." Charge offered her impression that his primary responsibility, along with his predominantly military staff, was to spy on Burmese in the U.S.

¶14. (C) Yin Yin Oo clarified that the defection of the DCM from the Burmese Embassy in 2004 had been a major shock, the regime did not want another, and so brought in the current CDA. She claimed that the former DCM now worked for the CIA. Charge noted that he reportedly worked for the now-defunct Military Intelligence, and suggested he worried what might happen to him if he returned after the dismantling of MI in

RANGOON 00000018 004 OF 004

the wake of Khin Nyunt's downfall. Yin Yin Oo replied that no MI officers working as diplomats had been imprisoned after their recalls to Burma. To Charge's question whether they still had jobs, she blithely asserted "they are all rich, you don't have to worry about them." Continuing to push the CIA connection, she said the former DCM had published an article under his name that could not have been written by him because the English was too good. Charge dismissed this as a crazy assumption, pointing out that it is routine in the U.S. to have editors go over any articles prior to publication to correct language and grammar.

Visa Problems

¶15. (C) Charge also raised our inability since September 2007 to get visas and re-entry permits for our permanently assigned staff and TDYers. Yin Yin Oo, who formerly directed the Consular Department, agreed that this was contrary to normal diplomatic practice and offered to check on the issue. Charge said that we had heard that Than Shwe had ordered no more visas for Americans after the September demonstrations. Yin Yin Oo suggested that the Foreign Minister might have been reluctant to move the visas forward to the Foreign Affairs Policy Council (a cabinet level committee chaired by Prime Minister Thein Sein) because several months ago someone had questioned why so many official Americans were traveling to Burma. Charge acknowledged that the large number of visa requests as we got ready to move into our new

Embassy might have overwhelmed the system, but the requests had significantly declined after September. Although Burmese Embassies have the authority to issue most visas, Yin Yin Oo knowledged that many, particularly Bangkok with the heaviest workload, might be referring them back to the FAPC out of caution.

Comment

¶16. (C) That Yin Yin Oo has been instructed to reach out again to the U.S. and British Embassies is an indication that some within the regime are interested in resuming some dialogue with us. She knew that much of what she asserted made little sense, regularly prefacing her remarks with "just so you know how these people think." We do need to know how they think, their xenophobia, their paranoia, their fear of change, their lack of awareness of how the rest of the world thinks. We also need to understand that their poor communication is not only with us, but with each other because they do not know whom they can trust, which adds to the dysfunctionality of the regime. No one speaks truth to power for fear of losing their privileged positions. Few of Charge's points will filter very far up, and those that do will likely to be edited to present a good news story. For this reason, to get the attention of Than Shwe, we must keep raising Burma at the UN. This irritates him to no end because it challenges his legitimacy. He can try to control the news coming into and going from Burma, but he cannot stop the outside world criticizing his stranglehold on power in Burma. Steady criticism of Than Shwe, and how he has destroyed this country, might persuade those few generals ready to open up to risk his wrath.

VILLAROSA